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AUTHOR Etaugh, Claire; Hall, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the hypothesis that parents consider preschool education to be more important for boys than for girls. To test this hypothesis, the following questions were examined: (1) Are boys disproportionately enrolled in nursery school? and (2) Do parents emphasize different reasons for enrolling boys and girls? The effect of social class on these differences was also examined. Questionnaires concerning 41 reasons for enrolling one's child in nursery school were distributed to the parents of all children enrolled in nursery schools in a midwestern city. Completed questionnaires were received from 599 parents (67%). The mean ratings given by parents of girls and by parents of boys to each of the 41 reasons were compared separately for each social class. Only one difference out of 82 reached significance. However, significantly more reasons were rated as more important by boys' parents than by girls' Parents in both classes. When differences in enrollment patterns were examined, results indicated a significantly higher enrollment of boys than girls in lower class schools, but not in middle class schools. The results suggest that nursery school may be valued more highly for boys, especially by lower class parents. (BD)

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Is Preschool Education More Highly Valued for Boys than Girls?

Claire Etaugh and Patricia Hall

Bradley University

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Is Preschool Education More Highly Valued for Boys than Girls?

One source of psychological sex differences appears to be differential socialization of girls and boys by their parents. Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) conclude from the available evidence that socialization pressures are more intense for boys than girls. For one thing, parents are more discouraging of sex-inappropriate behavior in sons than daughters (Fling & Manosevitz, 1972; Lansky, 1967; Fagot, Note 1). Further, parents administer more physical punishment to boys than to girls (e.g., Baumrind & Black, 1967; Bronfenbrenner, 1960; Minton, Kagan, & Levine, 1971; Newson & Newson, 1968; Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957; Siegelman, 1965; Tasch, 1952).

Another area in which boys may receive greater socialization demands is that of school achievement. Parents more often expect sons than daughters to go to college (Sears et al, 1957; Tasch, 1952; Hilton & Berglund, Note 2). It is not known, however, whether differential parental expectations regarding academic achievement of sons and daughters extend downward to the early school years. If so, it might be the case that parents would consider that earliest of educational experiences -- preschool education -- to be more important for boys than for girls. In order to test this hypothesis, the following questions were examined:
(a) Are boys disproportionately enrolled in nursery school?
(b) Do parents emphasize different reasons for en-

rolling boys and girls?

Method

Subjects

Subjects initially contacted were the parents of all children (483 boys and 408 girls) enrolled in all the 22 half-day preschools in Peoria, Illinois. Questionnaires were completed for 326 boys and 273 girls (67% of each sex).

Since social class differences in the socialization of boys and girls have been found (see Hess, 1970; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), the sample of 599 was divided into two groups on the basis of father's occupational level. A modification of the occupational scale developed by Hollingshead and Redlich (1958) was used. The occupational categories (with numerical levels in parentheses) were: (1) unskilled or semi-skilled; (2) skilled; (3) clerical or sales; (4) managerial; (5) professional. The first three categories were classified as lower-class (N=196); the last two as middle-class (N=403). All data were analyzed separately for each of the two groups.

Procedure

A questionnaire consisting of 41 possible reasons for sending a child to nursery school (including improvement or elimination of 14 problem behaviors), 23 questions concerning family characteristics,[1] and a cover letter assuring anonymity, was distributed to the parents

(see Table 1). Parents were asked to base their responses on their initial reasons for enrolling their child in nursery school. Twenty-seven reasons were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from extremely important to unimportant. The fourteen reasons concerning improvement or elimination of problem behaviors were rated either as important or unimportant. Parents completed the questionnaires at home and returned them to the school.

Results

The mean ratings given by parents of girls and parents of boys to each of the 41 reasons were compared separately for each social class by means of *t*-tests. Only one difference out of 82 reached significance: Middle-class parents of boys regarded improvement of speech difficulties as a more important reason for enrollment than did middle-class parents of girls ($t=2.15$, $df=401$, $p<.05$). Most likely, this difference was a chance occurrence.

However, a significantly greater number of reasons were rated as more important by boys' parents than by girls' parents in both classes.

In the middle class sample, parents of boys rates 31 of the 41 reasons as more important than did parents of girls, $\underline{X}^2(1)=10.76$, $\underline{p}<.005$. Similarly, 31 of the 41 reasons were rated as more important by lower-class parents of boys than by lower-class parents of girls, $\underline{X}^2(1)=10.76$, $\underline{p}<.005$.

In order to examine enrollment data for each social-class group, the nursery schools themselves were classified as either lower-class or middle-class on the basis of mean father occupational level. Those schools having

a mean father occupational level on returned questionnaires of 1 to 3 (N=6) were classified as lower-class and those having a mean level of 4 to 5 (N=16) were classified as middle-class.[2]

Males comprised 57% of children enrolled in lower-class schools, but only 50% of 3- and 4-year-olds residing in the city as a whole, or in the census tracts where lower-class schools were located. This difference is significant (t= 2.54, df=367, $p<.01$), indicating a proportionately greater enrollment of lower-class boys than lower-class girls. Males constituted 53% of the enrollment in middle-class schools. This figure does not differ significantly from the percentage of 3- to 4-year-old males residing either in the tracts where middle-class schools were located (52%) or in the city as a whole (50%).[3]

Completed questionnaires were returned for 57% of the boys and 58% of the girls enrolled in lower-class schools, and for 77% of the boys and 70% of the girls enrolled in middle-class schools. The greater return rate for boys as compared to girls in middle-class schools is marginally significant, χ^2 (1) = 3.59, $p<.06$.

Discussion

Can one conclude that parents consider preschool education to be more important for boys than girls? The evidence for this sample of respondents is equivocal. On the one hand, reasons for enrollment were rated similarly

by parents of boys and girls in both social classes. Nevertheless, those sex differences which did emerge were consistent with the hypothesis that nursery school may be valued more highly for boys, especially by lower-class parents: First, a greater number of reasons were rated as more important by boys' parents than by girls' parents in both classes. Second, lower-class parents were more likely to enroll their sons than their daughters.

These data are consistent with other findings which indicate that differential socialization of the sexes may be emphasized more in lower-class than in middle-class families (see Hess, 1970). Kohn (1959) reported that compared to middle-class mothers, lower-class mothers make a greater distinction between sex-appropriate behaviors for girls and boys. Results of other studies also suggest that sex-typing may be encouraged more strongly in lower-class families. Rabban (1950) found that lower-class children adopt sex-typed behavior earlier and with greater consistency than do middle-class children. Further, greater masculine sex-role preference is shown by lower-class than by upper-class elementary school boys (Hall & Keith, 1964), while feminine sex-typing is stronger among girls from less educated, as compared to more educated, families (Kagan & Moss, 1962).

The present findings suggest that unlike middle-class parents, lower-class parents may be more likely to enroll

their sons than their daughters in nursery school. Do boys subsequently receive more parental pressure to succeed in school than do girls, and if so are these differences greater for lower-class than middle-class children? Further research is needed to answer these questions.

Reference Notes

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2. Hilton, T. L., & Berglund, G. W. Sex differences in mathematics achievement-a longitudinal study. Educational Testing Service Research Bulletin, 1971. (unpublished)

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Footnotes

1 Only child's sex and father's occupational level are reported here.

2 The interval between 3 and 4 was divided equally between the two groups. Thus, schools with a mean father occupational level between 3.00 and 3.49 were placed in the lower-class group, and those with a mean level between 3.50 and 3.99 were classified as middle-class.

3 Two middle-class schools were omitted from these analyses since they were located in nonresidential areas for which no population data were available.

Table 1

Questionnaire Reasons for Enrolling Child in Nursery School

1. To help my child get used to being away from parents and home.
2. To help my child develop a sense of responsibility.
3. To give mother and child time away from each other.
4. To make sure that my child is prepared for elementary school.
5. To encourage musical and artistic creativity.
6. To help my child become more assertive.
7. To help my child develop respect for the property of others.
8. To encourage language development and increase vocabulary.
9. My child is hard to keep occupied at home.
10. To help my child become more outgoing and self confident.
11. To develop the desire and ability to share with others.
12. To help my child become more independent.
13. It was suggested by a physician, psychologist, or social worker.
14. To help my child's moral development and character.
15. To develop coordination and encourage physical activity by providing play equipment and space not available at home.
16. To help my child learn to be less boisterous and to play quietly.
17. To allow mother some time for her own interests.
18. To help my child learn to follow directions and obey adults.
19. To help teach my child politeness and good manners.
20. To provide the opportunity to play with children the same age.
21. To help my child deal with anger in a socially acceptable way.
22. To help develop kindness and consideration for others.
23. To help my child develop self-control.
24. So that my child will learn to like school at an early age.

Table 1 (continued)

25. To teach my child cooperation through participation in group activities.
26. To provide experiences which are fun and interesting.
27. To improve or eliminate a problem behavior.

    Specifically, to improve or eliminate:

28. Overactivity.
29. Difficulty making friends.
30. Temper tantrums.
31. Slow language development.
32. Poor coordination.
33. Selfishness.
34. Short attention span.
35. Overdependence on parents.
36. Shyness.
37. Fighting, hurting others.
38. Speech difficulties
39. Bossiness.
40. Disobedience.
41. Fear of things.